STUDIES IN STRANGE SOULS

by

ARTHUR SYMONS

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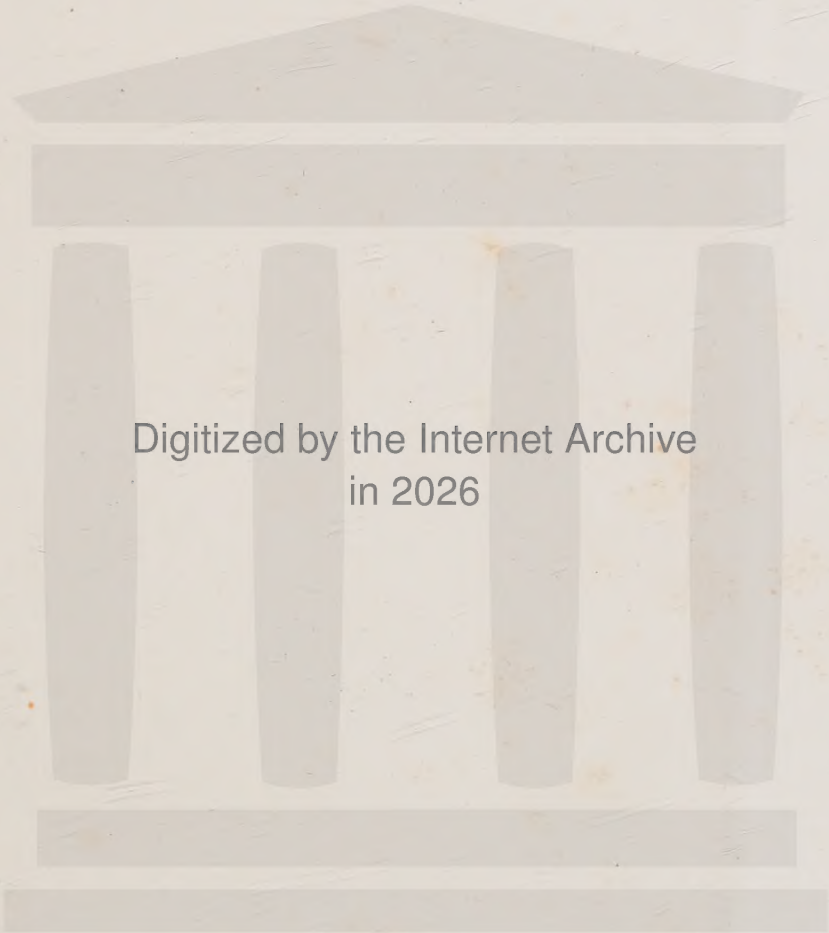
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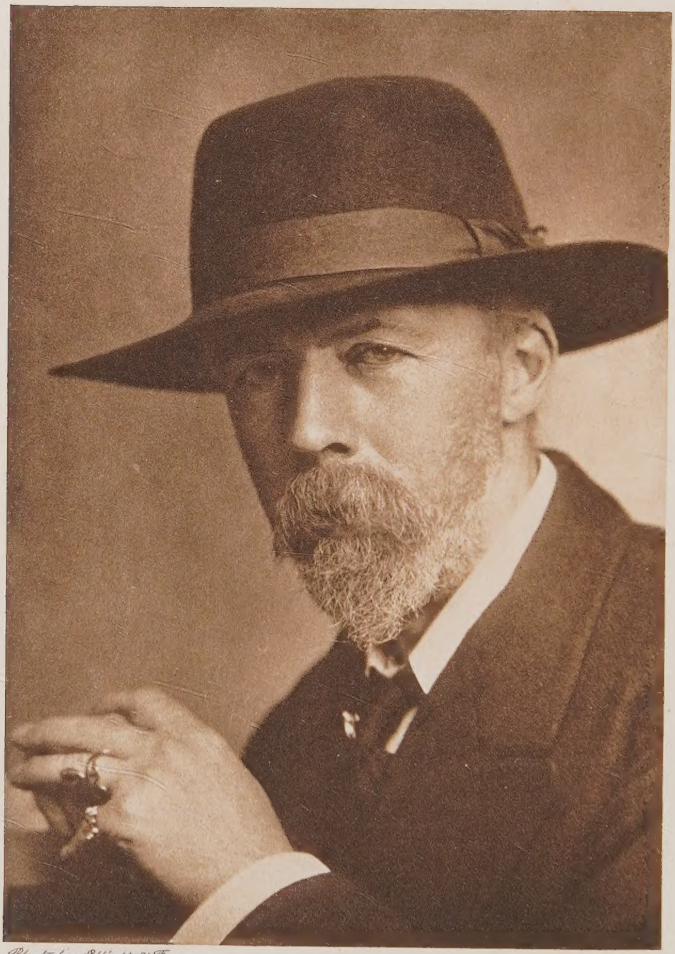

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Arthur Symons

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BY

ARTHUR SYMONS

Author of

'A Study of Thomas Hardy,' 'Studies in Seven Arts.'

With Three Portraits

LONDON

CHARLES J. SAWYER

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DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI

From the original painting by G. F. Watts in the National Portrait Gallery

D. G. Rossetti

DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI

SINCE Leonardo da Vinci and Blake, was there any painter except Rossetti who was so immensely gifted, and in such various ways?

I think that, in a certain sense, his imagination often worked under a single and a double inspiration. His genius was composed of so many contrasting elements that it may be said that a song and a picture were conceived by some sudden instinct; that, with his unflagging energy, he rarely knew in what direction his very impulses were leading him, where his sense of abstract beauty was driving him, as he passed from *La Bocca Bocciata* to *Dante's Dream.* With no passion for music as music, he gives one as actual a sense of it in a stanza of *The Bride's*

Prelude as in the fixed eyes of one of his portraits of women.

I am not certain if Pater said quite the final thing when he wrote: 'All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music.' It was Leonardo da Vinci who said, in a more deeply imaginative way: 'Music cannot be called other than the sister of painting.' It may be imagined that music and harmony are co-existent: that they are 'dancers in the eternal rhythm.' Yet I cannot conceive, save rarely (as, for instance, in Giorgione), that any painter ever seriously thought of any connection between these two arts. Yet the legend is that, to the sound of flutes and the presence of mimes, Leonardo wove, year after year, the web of his magical *Gioconda*.

It was one of Rossetti's glories to paint luxuriously luxurious women, surrounded by every form of luxury. And some of

them are set to pose in Eastern garments, with caskets in their hands and flames about them, looking out with unsearchable eyes. His colours, before they began to have, like his forms, an exaggeration, a blurred vision which gave him the need of repainting, of depriving his figures of life, were as if charmed into their own places; they took on at times some strange and stealthy and startling ardours of paint, with a subtle fury. By his fiery imagination, his restless energy, he created a world: curious, astonishing, at first sight; strange, morbid, and subtly beautiful. Everything he made was chiefly for his own pleasure; he had a contempt for the outside world, and his life was so given up to beauty, in the search for it and in the finding of it, that one can but say that not only that his life was passion consumed by passion, as his nerves became more and more his tyrants (tyrants,

indeed, these were, more formidable and more alluring and more tempting than even the nerves confess), but also that, in the words of Pater: 'To him life is a crisis at every moment.'

There was in him, as in many artists, the lust of the eyes. And as others feasted their lust on elemental things, as in Turner's *Rain, Steam and Speed*, as in Whistler's *Valparaiso*, as in the *Olympia* of Manet, as in a *Décor de Ballet* of Degas, so did Rossetti upon other regions than theirs. He had neither the evasive and instinctive genius of Whistler, nor Turner's tremendous sweep of vision, not the creative and fiercely imaginative genius of Manet. But he had his own way of feasting on forms and visions more sensuous, more nervously passionate, more occult, perhaps, than theirs. Yet, as his intentions overpower him, as he becomes the slave and no longer the master of his

dreams, his pictures become no longer symbolic. They become idols. Venus, growing more and more Asiatic as the moon's crescent begins to glitter above her head, and her name changes from Aphrodite into Astarte, loses all the freshness of the waves from which she was born, and her own sorcery hardens into a wooden image painted for savage worship. Dreams are no longer content to be turned into waking realities, taking the colour of the daylight, that they may be visible to our eyes, but they remain lunar, spectral, an unintelligible menace.

In the fire and imagination of Rossetti's genius there is intensity—of will, of conception, of spiritual intoxication, 'of large draughts of intellectual day,' and of 'thirsts of love.' There is a glamour and an enchantment that bring into modern verse a certain all but unheard-of sense of

strangeness; as, for instance, where his verse is most tragic and narcotic, hallucinated and sinuously subtle. In his gnomic *Soothsay* he shows that no enchanter can ever be quite certain of his spells:

> Strive that thy works prove equal: lest
> That work which thou hast done the best
> Should come to be to thee at length
> (Even as to envy seems the strength
> Of others) hateful and abhorred,—
> Thine own above thyself made lord,—
> Of self-rebuke the bitterest.

It is equally certain that he rarely dared let himself 'do naught' for fear 'of the soul's utter depths unsealed.' And he said with real subtlety, on his revision of one of his sonnets: 'Solemn poetry belongs to the class of phrase absolutely forbidden, I think, *in* poetry. It is intellectually incestuous—poetry seeking to beget its emotional offspring on its own identity.'

That Rossetti, whose face indicated voluptuousness brooding thoughtfully over destiny, was intensely sensitive, is true; and this made him a sort of medium to forces seen and unseen. So he fascinated women; so did the supernatural fascinate him. Next after Coleridge, his vision, lifted into its higher ecstasies, possessed and was possessed by the supernatural. It may begin in *Sister Helen* and end in *The King's Tragedy*. Between these comes *Rose Mary* (written in 1871), in which an occult imagination has created (in a medium unlike that of Coleridge), as an exorcist, a region where the supernatural element is constantly fused with inevitable realities; where one sees in the soul that was lost to bring it back

A cloud where fiends had come to dwell,—
A mask that hung from the gate of Hell.

And in the tragic woof of this conception

there is that kind of wizardry in which, as it seems to me, Rossetti reclothes himself in the enchanter's robes of Coleridge. For, even in these two stanzas, one finds how the spirit of the first poet is translated into the spirit of the later poet:

A snake's small eye blinks dull and sly,
And the lady's eyes they shrank in her head,
Each shrank up to a serpent's eye.

It seemed a snake with a golden sheath
Crept near, as a slow flame flickereth,
And stung her daughter's heart to death.

Sister Helen (in a sense his highest, creation) is an arduous sensuous tragedy, where the soul and the senses of this creature endure 'the terrible Love turned to Hate, perhaps the deadliest of all passion-wrought complexities,' visualized, by pure magic, on a small space of the earth, that lies between Hell and Heaven. And all this is only a part of that sense of

suspense that comes over one's senses, as omen follows on omen, as Helen's pulses beat more wildly until she expires. And she, turned witch for a reason, transformed into a breathing and destroying angel, of no perdition, is driven by an absolute sense of vengeance to destroy her lover's life. She is simply possessed by the one fixed idea: she is one who has loved and hated too much to care even for her life's survival: she who can cry:

He sees me in earth, in moon and sky.

She is one who knows that 'Hate, born of Love, is blind as he,' that she has not one drop of living love for the man whose soul is to pass before her eyes. Yet her one heart-rending cry before she sighs out the last, is:

Fire shall forgive me as I forgive!

With this her strength leaves her; all that remains is death:

A soul that's lost as mine is lost!

A Last Confession, the only poem that Rossetti wrote in blank verse, is more than a soul's tragedy: it is the tragedy of ruined hopes, of love's deceptions; a confession in which the imagination is not everything, so coloured is it, so filled with fire and shadow. It is in one nervous crisis that he utters implacable words against woman: out of his heart's despair, out of the heart's despair of all of us who have known 'the hatred of man for woman, the hatred of woman for man':

> You have not known
> The dreadful soul of woman, who one day
> Forgets the old and takes the new to heart,
> Forgets what man remembers, and therewith
> Forgets the man.

Yet he has heard souls shriek in Latin; has heard the bell 'strike the hour in hell'; has always before him the vision of the girl he has slain, who menaces him, always in his sight, in his hearing, in the

laugh of the brown-shouldered harlot—her coarse, empty laughter, as he saw her lean out of the tavern window thick with vine. So, with one touch of vain hope—'we may have sweetness yet'—he turns back on himself, on his moment's madness, when fire was blood, and says, as one eternally hopeless, seeing her unwind her thick wet hair:

> For now she draws it out
> Slowly, and only smiles as yet; look, Father,
> She scarcely smiles; but I shall hear her laugh
> Soon, when she shows the crimson steel to
> God.

As for the flesh, when he touches it in his verses, it is intimate with the soul and the body, as clean and natural as sex; as he himself said: 'with that beauty of natural universal function' which one finds in *Nuptial Sleep;* and 'here all the passionate and just delights of the body are declared—somewhat figuratively, but

unmistakably—to be as naught if not ennobled by the concurrence of the soul at all times.' In *Eden Bower* there is also a 'central universal meaning': a song that whirls on the wings of scented whirlwinds as abnormal passions turn, in Lilith and the Snake, malignant. Again take *Jenny*, so Pagan in spirit, so modern in treatment, where a mere sensual courtesan's form of life is explained to her (with what wonderful insight!) by the 'Romeo of a night,' with, certainly, a half cynical revulsion of feeling; and as certainly woven out of an eternal problem. And it is in such lines as these that he troubles many rhythms that had become stagnant:

> Some things which are not yet enrolled
> In market-lists are bought and sold
> Even till the early Sunday light,
> When Saturday night is market-night
> Everywhere, be it dry or wet,
> And market-night in the Haymarket

Certainly it is in *Nuptial Sleep* that Rossetti has said, in his own fashion, what Blake had said before him in these lines:

> What is it men in women do require?
> The lineaments of gratified desire.
> What is it women do in men require?
> The lineaments of gratified desire.

But the less famous sonnet, *After the French Liberation of Italy*, is one in which the image of a woman is used literally—used for Italian reasons—in the form of a harlot; the most explicit sonnet ever written in regard to the question of the sexual relationship.

Certainly no modern poet ever had anything like the same grasp on whatever is essential in poetry as Rossetti's; for all that he wrote and said about Art has in it an absolute rightness of judgment; and with these, as absolutely, an intellectual sanity. Here is one principle of artistic

creation stated with instantaneous certainty: 'Conception, *fundamental brain work*, that is what makes the difference in all art. Work your metal as much as you like, but first take care that the gold was worth working.' But it is, strangely enough, that at the beginning of a review of Hake's *Parables and Tales* he says the final, the inevitable words on creation, and on what lies in the artist's mind before the act of creation: 'The first and highest is that where the work has been all mentally "cartooned," as it were, beforehand by a process intensely conscious, but patient and silent—an occult evolution of life: then follows the glory of wielding words, and we see the hand of Dante, as the hand of Michelangelo—or almost as that quickening hand which Michelangelo has dared to embody—sweep from left to right, fiery and final.'

That the spirit is greater than the flesh,

that the spirit can never be reached by killing the flesh, is no new discovery; it is the wise interpretation by a modern critic of the original meaning. And it certainly typifies the creative work of Blake and of Rossetti. Yet while Rossetti's grip on the flesh is sensuous and luxurious, Blake's is imaginative and unsensuous. Yet in both how eagerly the soul struggles to escape the thraldom of the body!—Blake in his writhing convulsed figures in Dantesque agonies; Rossetti in his women's haunting, half-mystical eyes, thrilled (as the full red lips are) by the vain desire of the one desire; to be loved, as only absolute beauty is loved.

To him *The House of Life* (really, in his imagination, 'The House of Love': as there is no mystic to whom love has not seemed to be the essence of the ultimate expression of the soul) was symbolic, as are our bodies. Instinctively drawn to faces

(chiefly women's faces), he narrowed his ideals, such as they were, into two forms of intensity: his obsession for beauty, his obsession for women. And as he said of beauty, 'I draw it in as simply as my breath,' so did his thirst for these two increase with the increase of years.

The tremulous flame of his soul was disturbed by a mere breath, a sound, a shock on his nerves; more than anything else by suspense—on his own account and on others; and simply for the reason that his sensitiveness was so intense that it interpenetrated his work with his life. And he was one of those rare artists to whom these verses might be applied:

Henceforth for each of us remains the world.
The gates have closed behind us, we are hurled
From the fixed paradise of our content
Into an outer world of banishment,

And, in this anger of the garden's Lord
His serene angel with the fiery sword
Has yet more pitilessly cast us forth,
You by the gate looking upon the North,
And I by the gate looking on the South.

William Michael Rossetti survived his brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti, by thirty seven years, dying at the age of 89. Not really a man of letters, in the essential sense, his verse, as Gabriel said, 'Always going back on the old track,' he had a certain talent of his own; for he edited an excellent edition of Blake's poems, and a creditable edition of Shelley, the first critical edition of his poems.

He was the first Englishman who ever dared to print a selection from Whitman's *Leave of Grass*, in 1868; and in spite of having to exclude such passages as he considered indecent, the whole book was a valuable contribution to our literature.

There is no question that Michael was

not invaluable to Gabriel; indeed, during the whole of the tragic and wonderful life of that man of supreme genius; not only because he dedicated his *Poems* of 1870 to one 'who had given them the first brotherly hearing'; not only because, had not Michael been with him at the British Museum on the ever-memorable and unforgettable date of April 30, 1857, he had never bought the imperishable MS. *Book of Blake*, borrowing for this purchase ten shillings from his brother; but also because when Rossetti, after his wife's death, had his manuscript volume of poems exhumed in October, 1869, he did the right thing, both in his impetuous act in burying them beside his dead wife, and in his silence with his brother—who was really aware of the event—so that his own tortured nerves might have some respite.

Still, I have never forgotten how

passionately Eleanore Duse said to me, in 1900: 'Rossetti's eyes desire some feverish thing, but the mouth and chin hesitate in pursuit. All Rossetti is in that story of his MS. buried in his wife's coffin. He could do it, he could repent of it; but he should have gone and taken it back himself: he sent his friends.'

In one of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's invaluable notes on Poetry, he tells us that to him 'the leading point about Coleridge's work is its human love.' Yet, I think, he wanted in life more than most men of such genius as he had wanted. For, as Watts-Dunton said: 'He was the slave of his imagination—an imagination of a power and dominance such as I have never seen equalled. Of his vividness, no artistic expression of his can give any notion. He had not the smallest command over it.' That is one of the reasons why, with all his affection for his brother

Michael, the chasm between them was immense—a chasm no dragon-created bridge could ever span; Gabriel had in him, perhaps, too much of 'chasm-fire': his genius was too flame-fledged for earth's eternity to have ever had one wing of it broken by an enemy's shaft.

In 1862, Rossetti took possession of his famous house, 10 Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, where he lived to the end of his life, and whose joint occupants were, for a certain length of time, George Meredith, Swinburne and William Michael Rossetti, who left the house in 1874, the year in which he married Lucy Madox Brown.

That four men of individualities so utterly different and, in some senses, aggressive, or at least assertive, should have been able to live together in closeness of continuous intimacy, from which there was hardly an escape, was barely

conceivable. Yet it was in this house that Swinburne wrote many of his *Poems and Ballads*, part of his book on Blake and his masterpiece, *Atalanta in Calydon*. There Meredith finished his masterpiece in the matter of tragic and passionate verse, *Modern Love*. There is nothing like it in the whole of English poetry, nor did he ever achieve so magnificent a vivisection of the heart in verse as in these pages—in which he created a wonderful style, acid, stinging, bitter-sweet, poignant—where these self-torturing and cruel lovers weave the amazing web of their disillusions as they struggle, open-eyed, against the blindness of passion. The poem laughs while it cries.

Swinburne, who was, I think, on the whole, less susceptible in regard to abusive attacks on his books than Meredith or Rossetti, vindicates himself, and superbly, in the pamphlet I have before

me: *Notes on Poems and Reviews* (1866). He has been accused of indecency and immorality and perversity; and is amazed to find that *Anactoria* 'has excited among the chaste and candid critics of the day, or hour, or minute, a more vehement reputation, a more virtuous horror, a more passionate appeal, than any other of my writing. I am evidently not virtuous enough to understand them. I thank Heaven that I am not. *Ma corruption rougirait de leur pudeur.*'

In regard to *Laus Veneris*, I turn for a moment to W. M. Rossetti's *Swinburne's Poems and Ballads: a Criticism* (1866), which, on the whole is uncommonly well written, to one of those passages where he betrays a kind of Puritanism in his Italian blood; saying that the opening lines were, apart from any question of sentiment, much overdone. 'That is a situation (and there are many such in Swinburne's

writings) which we would much rather see touched off with the reticence of a Tennyson: he would probably have given one epithet, or at the utmost, one line, to it, and it would at least equally have haunted the memory.' I turn from this to Swinburne on Tennyson, as, for instance: 'At times, of course, his song was then as sweet as ever it has sounded since; but he could never make sure of singing right for more than a few minutes or stanzas.' And—what is certainly true—that Vivien's impurity is eclipsed by her incredible and incomparable vulgarity. 'She is such a sordid creature as plucks men passing by the sleeve.'

Now the actual origin of *Laus Veneris* came about when Swinburne, with Rossetti, bought the first edition of Fitzgerald's wonderful version of *Omar Khayyam*. 'We invested,' Swinburne writes, 'in hardly less than sixpennyworth apiece,

and on returning to the stall next day, for more, found that we had sent up the market to the sinfully extravagant price of twopence, an imposition which evoked from Rossetti a fervent and impressive remonstrance.' Swinburne went down to stay with Meredith in the country with the priceless book; and, before lunch, they read, alternately, stanza after stanza. The result was that after lunch, Swinburne went to his room and came down to Meredith's study with his invariable blue paper and wrote there and then thirteen stanzas of *Laus Veneris*, that end with the lines:

Till when the spool is finished, lo I see
His web, reeled off, curls and goes out like
steam.

Swinburne's re-creation of the immortal legend of Venus and her Knight, certainly—though certainly unknown to W. M. Rossetti—owes also much of its

origin to Swinburne's inordinate admiration of *Les Fleurs du Mal* of Baudelaire. Its origin, in a certain sense only; that is of the influence of one poet on the other. For, as he says: 'It was not till my poem was completed that I received from the hands of its author the admirable pamphlet of Charles Baudelaire on Wagner's *Tannhauser*. If anyone desires to see, expressed in better words than I can command, the conception of the mediæval Venus which it was my aim to put into verse, let him turn to the magnificent passage in which Baudelaire describes the fallen goddess, grown diabolic among eyes that would not accept her as divine.'

I need not reiterate the extraordinary influence that Baudelaire always had on Swinburne: seen most of all in *Poems and Ballads* and recurring at intervals in later volumes of his verse. Both had in their genius a certain abnormality, a certain

perversity, a certain love of depravity in the highest sense of the word.

Swinburne, who had a fashion of over-praising many writers, such as Hugo, so that his prose is often extravagant and the criticism as unbalanced as the praise, dedicated his finest book, *William Blake*, to W. M. Rossetti, in words whose almost strained sense of humility—a way really in which he often showed the intensity of his pride—makes one wonder how he could have said: 'I can but bring you brass for the gold you send me; but between equals and friends there can be no question of barter. Like Diomed, I take what I am given and offer what I have.' What Swinburne had—his genius—he never gave away lavishly; here he is much too lavish. 'There is a joy in praising' might have been written for him, and he communicates to us, as few writers do, his own sense of joy in beauty. It is quite

possible to be annoyed by many of the things he has said, not only about literature, but also about religion, and morals and politics. But he has never said anything on any of these subjects which is not generous and high-minded, and, at least for the moment, passionately and absolutely sincere.

It is almost cruel to have to test one sentence of the man of talent with one sentence of the man of genius. I chose these from the *Notes on the Royal Academy Exhibition* they wrote together in 1868, which I have before me, in the form of a printed pamphlet. 'If everybody tells me that the picture of A, of which this pamphlet says nothing, merits criticism, or that the picture of B, praised for colour, claims praise on the score of drawing also, I shall have no difficulty in admitting the probable correctness of these remarks; but, if he adds that I am blamable for the

omissions, I shall feel entitled to reply that A's picture and B's draughtsmanship are not and indeed never were in the bond.'

How honestly that is written and how prosaically. 'Pale as from poison, with the blood drawn back from her very lips, agonized in face and limbs with the labour and the fierce contention of old love with new, of a daughter's love with a bride's, the fatal figure of Medea pauses a little on the funereal verge of the wood of death, in act to pour a blood-like liquid into the soft opal-coloured hollow of a shell.' How princely that praise of Sandys rings in one's ears, lyrical prose that quickens the blood! But the greater marvel to me is that Swinburne in his *Miscellanies*, of 1866, should have quoted two sentences of W. M. Rossetti on Shakespeare's Sonnets, and ended by saying: 'These words themselves deserve to put on

immortality: there are none truer or nobler, wiser or more memorable in the whole historic range of highest criticism.' I can only imagine it as that of an arrow in flight: only, it loses the mark.

It was when Christina Rossetti was living at 30 Torrington Square that I spent several entrancing hours with her. She had still traces of her Italian beauty; but all the loveliness had gone out of her, so subtly and so delicately painted by Gabriel when she was young. The moment she entered, dressed simply and severely, she bowed, almost curtsied, with that old-fashioned charm that since her time has gone mostly out of the world. Her face lit up when she spoke of Gabriel: for between them was always love and admiration. His genius, to her, both as a poet and a painter, invariably received her elaborate and unstinted praise.

She told me that Gabriel had said to

her: '*The Convent Threshold* is a very splendid piece of feminine ascetic passion; and, to me, one of your greatest poems is that on France after the Siege—*To-Day For Me*.' And that Swinburne specially loved *Passing Away, Saith the World, Passing Away*. It always seems to me that as she had read Leopardi and Baudelaire, the thought of death had for her the same fascination; only it is not the fascination of attraction, as with the one, nor repulsion, as with the other, but of interest, sad but scarcely unquiet interest in what the dead are doing underground, in their memories, if memory they have, of the world they have left.

Yet this fact is of curious interest, knowing the purity of her imagination, that when Swinburne sent her his *Atalanta in Calydon* she crossed out in ink one line:

The supreme evil, God.

Swinburne himself told me of his amaze-

ment and amusement when he happened to turn to this page while he was looking through the copy he had sent her.

I give here an original letter that I possess which was sent to Mrs. W. M. Rossetti in reference to a MS. poem of mine called *The Revenge*.

30 TORRINGTON SQUARE, W.C.
Thursday evening

My dear Lucy,

I have been rather occupied one way and another, but now I have grappled with the poem for which I thank you in returning it. What shall I say? The fact is I think it diabolical. Its degree of serene skill and finesse intensifies to me its horror. I wish it had never been written: this failing, I wish it may never be published.

Of course this is not criticism even according to the weakliest feminine standard: but what would be the use of my attempting to criticize what I should like to expunge? I

wish I could say something pleasanter, but the *wife's railing* or the *husband's silence* comes to the surface!

Your affectionate sister,

Christina G. Rossetti.

The unprinted letter I give here, written to an American painter, follows aptly enough after the two sentences I have quoted, showing, for one thing, his sense of humour:

KELMSCOTE,

September 26th, 1871

My dear Boughton,

I ought to have answered at once to say how little I connected yourself in any way with the views taken in the newspapers about Miller. Perhaps indeed my own mistrust of them was rather too seriously expressed and the scrambling picturesque side is, as you say, the leading interest of the matter.

Your acquisition in dragon china seems as if it must be a nice old bit. I used to get very excited about such things for a brief spell

once, and *what* one then collected stands about now like a ghost of some queer temporary self. However, the ghost of *itself* is all likely to remain of it in the end, as the British servant beats the Chinese dragon hollow for destructiveness. I'll hope to show you the things one day before then.

Very truly yours,

D. G. Rossetti.

P.S.—By the bye I can't think how that paragraph got into print about my poetic projects. I have none for the present, though I have been at work a little.

Certainly Watts-Dunton has his place among the creative critics. I am acquainted with nothing in Hazlitt, in Leigh Hunt, or in Matthew Arnold which deals so profoundly or so surely with the first principles of imaginative literature as he has almost always done. He was a born critic, he was not a born

poet. I must indeed qualify my statement in regard to some of his sonnets, which have in them something fine, subtle, intangible—an elfin or wizard music: in these, for instance: *Natura Benigna*, *Natura Maligna*, *A Dead Poet*, and *Prophecy of the Second Picture*, one of seven sonnets written in Venice. His definition which has become famous, 'The Renaissance of Wonder,' for that great revived movement of the soul of man, after a long period of prosaic acceptance in all things, including art and literature, has its value. It may be corrected by this definition of Zoroaster: 'Poetry is apparent pictures of unapparent realities.' To the great imaginative poets it is; and that, and not their wonder, at these pictures, is what matters. There is much in the romantic attitude of mere wonder: but what in Cyril Tourneur remains wonder, becomes in Shakespeare a divine cer-

tainty. Imagination is sight, not wonder, a thing seen, not an opening of the eyes to see it.

I remember once saying to Swinburne that I was a *noctambule* in Paris and a night wanderer when I was in London. He smiled subtly, and admitted that, in London, Rossetti had a passion for wandering at night. This induces me to make some quotations from Watts-Dunton's unsigned notice of *Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti to William Allingham*, 1871.

'Certain passages in these letters will surprise the reader by throwing light upon a side of Rossetti's life and character which was only known to his intimate friends. Recluse as Rossetti came to be, he knew more of "London life" in the true sense of the word than did many of those who were supposed to know it well —diners-out like Browning, for instance, and Richard Doyle. That the author of

The House of Life knew London on the side that Dickens knew it, better than any other poet of his time will no doubt surprise many a reader. His visits to Jamrach's mart for wild animals led him to explore the wonderful world, that so few people ever dream of, which lies around Ratcliffe Highway. He observed with the greatest zest the movements of the East End swarm. Moreover, his passion for picking up "curios" and antique furniture made him familiar with quarters of London that he would otherwise have never known. And not Dickens himself had more of what may be called the "Haroun al Raschid passion" for wandering through a city's streets at night.

'In summer, as in winter, he rose very late in the day and made a breakfast, as he used to say, which was to keep him in fuel for something under twelve hours. He would then begin to paint, and

scarcely leave his work till the daylight waned. Then he would dine, and afterwards start off for a walk through the London streets, which to him, as he used to say, put on a magical robe with the lighting of the gas lamps. After walking for miles through the streets, either with a friend or alone, loitering at the windows of such shops as still were open, he would turn into an oyster shop or late restaurant for supper. Here his frankness of bearing was quite irresistible with strangers whenever it pleased him to approach them, as he sometimes did. The most singular and bizarre incidents of his life occurred to him on these occasions—incidents which he would relate with a dramatic power that set him at the head of the "raconteurs" of his time. One of these "rencontres" in the Haymarket was of a quite extraordinary character.'

Rossetti's phrase about poetry, that it

must be 'smusing'; his 'commandment' about verse translation, 'that a good poem shall not be turned into a bad one'; his roughest and most random criticisms about poets are as direct and inevitable as his finest verse. Only Coleridge among English poets has anything like the same definite grasp upon whatever is essential in poetry. And it is this intellectual sanity partly, this complete knowledge of the medium in which he worked, that has given Rossetti a position of his own, a kind of leadership in art. And, technically, Rossetti has done much for English poetry. Such a line as—

And when the night-vigil was done,

is a perfectly good metrical line if read without any displacement of the normal accent in speaking. Rossetti did nothing but good by his troubling of many rhythms which had become stagnant, and

it is in his extraordinary subtlety of rhythm, most accomplished where it seems most hesitating, that he has produced his finest emotional effects, effects before his time found but rarely, and for the most part accidentally, in English poetry.

Like Baudelaire and like Mallarmé in France, Rossetti was not only a wholly original poet, but a new personal force in literature. That he stimulated the sense of beauty is true of Rossetti in a way it is not true of Tennyson, for instance, as it is true of Baudelaire, in a way it is not true of Victor Hugo. In Rossetti's work there is an actually hypnotic quality which exerts itself on those who come within his circle at all. Dreams are precise; it is only when we awake, when we go outside, that they become vague. In a certain sense Rossetti, with all his keen practical intelligence, was never wholly awake, had

never gone outside that house of dreams in which the only real things were the things of the imagination. In the poetry of most poets there is a double kind of existence, of which each half is generally quite distinct: a real world, and a world of the imagination. But the poetry of Rossetti knows but one world, and it inhabits a corner there, like a perfectly contented prisoner, or like a prisoner to whom the sense of imprisonment is a joy. The love of beauty, the love of life, because love is the supreme energy of beauty, suffices for an existence in which every moment is a crisis: for to him, as Pater has said, 'Life is a crisis at every moment': life, that is to say, the inner life, the life of imagination in which the senses are messengers from the outer world, from which they can but bring disquieting tidings.

The whole of this poetry is tragic, though without pathos or even self-pity.

Every human attempt to maintain happiness is fore-doomed to be a failure, and this is an attempt to maintain ecstasy in a region where everything which is not ecstasy is pain. In reading other every poet who has written of love one is conscious of compensations: the happiness of loving or of being loved, the honour of defeat, the help and comfort of nature or of action. But here all energy is concentrated on the one ecstasy, and this exists for its own sake, and the desire of it is like thirst, which returns after every partial satisfaction. The desire of beauty, the love of love, can but be a form of martyrdom when, as with Rossetti, there is also the desire of possession.

It was in the beauty of women, and chiefly in the mysterious beauty of faces, that Rossetti found the supreme embodiment of beauty; and it was in the love of women, and not in any more abstract love

of God, of nature, or of ideas, that he found the supreme revelation of love. With this intensity he has rendered in his painting, as in his poetry, one ideal, one obsession. He calls what is really the House of Love 'The House of Life,' and this is because the house of love was literally to him the house of life. There is no mystic to whom love has not seemed to be the essence or ultimate expression of the soul. Rossetti's whole work is a parable of this belief, and it is a parable written with his life blood. Of beauty he has said, 'I drew it in as simply as my breath,' but, as the desire of beauty possessed him, as he laboured to create it over again, with rebellious words or colours, always too vague for him when they were most precise, never 'the precise embodiment of a dream,' the pursuit turned to a labour and the labour to a pain. Part of what hypnotises us in this

work is, no doubt, that sense of personal tragedy which comes to us out of its elaborate beauty: the eternal tragedy of those who have loved the absolute in beauty too well, and with too mortal a thirst.

ALGERNON CHARLES
SWINBURNE

From the original painting by G. F. Watts in the National Portrait Gallery

A. C. Swinburne

ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE

IN one sense a poet is always the most valuable critic of his own work; in another sense his opinion is almost valueless. He knows, better than anyone else, what he wanted to do, and he knows, better than any one else, how nearly he has done it. In judging his own technical skill in the accomplishment of his aim, it is easy for him to be absolutely unbiased, technique being a thing wholly apart from one's self, an acquirement. But, in a poem, the way it is done is by no means everything; something else, the vital element in it, the quality of inspiration, as we rightly call it, has to be determined. Of this the poet is rarely a judge. To him it is a part of himself, and he is scarcely more capable of

questioning its validity than he is of questioning his own intentions. To him it is enough that it is his. Conscious, as he may rightly be, of genius, how can he discriminate, in his own work between the presence or the absence of that genius, which, though it means everything, may be absent in a production technically faultless, or present in a production less strictly achieved according to rule? Swinburne, it is evident, grudges some of the fame which has set *Atalanta in Calydon* higher in general favour than *Erechtheus*, and, though he is perfectly right in every reason which he gives for setting *Erechtheus* above *Atalanta in Calydon*, the fact remains that there is something in the latter which is not, in anything like the same degree, in the former: a certain spontaneity, a prodigal wealth of inspiration. In exactly the same way, while the Ode of Athens and the Ode on the

Armada are alike magnificent as achievements, there is no more likelihood of Swinburne going down to posterity as the writer of those two splendid poems than there is of Coleridge, to take Swinburne's own instance, being remembered as the writer of the Ode to France rather than as the writer of the Ode on Dejection. The Ode to France is a product of the finest poetical rhetoric; the Ode on Dejection is a growth of the profoundest poetical genius.

Another point on which Swinburne takes for granted what is perhaps his highest endowment as a poet, while dwelling with fine enthusiasm on the 'entire and absolute sincerity' of a whole section of poems in which the sincerity itself might well have been taken for granted, is that marvellous metrical inventiveness which is without parallel in English or perhaps in any other literature. 'A writer

conscious of any natural command over the musical resources of his language,' says Swinburne, 'can hardly fail to take such pleasure in the employment of this gift or instinct as the greatest writer and the greatest versifier of our age must have felt at its highest possible degree when composing a musical exercise of such incomparable scope and fulness as *Les Djinns*.' In metrical inventiveness Swinburne is as much Victor Hugo's superior as the English language is superior to the French in metrical capability. His music has never the sudden bird's flight, the thrill, pause and unaccountable ecstasy of the very finest lyrics of Blake or of Coleridge; one never wholly forgets the artist in the utterance. But where he is incomparable is in an 'arduous fulness' of intricate harmony, around which the waves of melody flow, foam and scatter like the waves of the sea about a rock. No poet

has ever loved or praised the sea as Swinburne has loved and praised it; and to no poet has it been given to create music with words in so literal an analogy with the inflexible and vital rhythmical science of the sea.

Swinburne is a critic because he is a poet, and for no other reason. His book on Blake is the best of his books of criticism, because in it he is more wholly content to be a poet than in any other. In what he has written on Blake, a poet divines a poet; and no error in such a divination can be essential. Where this book is invaluable is in his interpretation of poetry as poetry, of symbolism as poetry, of pictorial design as poetry. He absorbs every form of art, and they all turn to poetry, and can be rendered by him only in terms of poetry. In this huge book there is not a page—not even in those flaming footnotes which spire from page

to page after the dwindling body of the text—which is not essentially poetry rather than prose. And the consequence is that the prose is often defined as extravagant, and the criticism as unbalanced. It has the balance of an arrow: it hits the mark. Swinburne is a great praiser, and to praise the right thing is the highest privilege of the critic. He is, I think, the only critic of our time (with the exception of Baudelaire) who has never, by design or accident, praised the wrong things.

Theodore Watts-Dunton as a critic of fundamental things is of the lineage of Coleridge. In flashes Lamb could outshine Coleridge. He had a genius for living, and his genius for writing was only a part of it, which he left to others to remember him by. He defined the quality of Wordsworth: 'The book is full of original thought, but it does not often

make you laugh or cry. It too artfully aims at simplicity of expression.' And in writing of pictures he can write as no one has ever written on Titian. What is in this style, this way of putting things, so variegated, so like his own harlequin in his 'ghastly vest of white patchwork,' 'the apparition of a dead rainbow': what can it be that gives to a style, which no man can analyse, its 'terseness, its jocular pathos, which makes one feel in laughter?' These are his own words, not used of himself: but do they not do something to define what can, after all, never be explained? I know one who read the essays of Elia with intense delight, and was astonished when I asked her if she had been amused. She had seen so well through the fun to its deep inner meaning that the fun had not detained her. She had found in all of it nothing but a pure intellectual

reason, beyond logic, where reason is one with intuition.

Unlike most creative critics, or most critics who were creative artists in another medium, Coleridge, when he was writing criticism, wrote it wholly for its own sake, almost as if it were a science. He is the one philosophic critic who is also a poet, and thus he is the one critic who instinctively knows his way through all the intricasies of the creative mind. 'The ultimate end of criticism,' wrote Coleridge, 'is much more to establish the principles of writing than to furnish rules how to pass judgment on what has been written by others.' And for this task he had an incomparable foundation: imagination, insight, logic, almost every critical faculty united in one: and he was a poet who allowed himself to be a critic.

Baudelaire wrote: 'It would be a wholly new event in the history of the arts if a

critic were to turn himself into a poet, a reversal of every psychic law, a monstrosity: on the other hand, all great poets become naturally, inevitably, critics. In the spiritual life of the poets there must come a crisis when they would think out their art, discover the obscure laws in consequence of which they have produced, and draw from this study a series of precepts whose divine purpose is infallibility in poetic production. It would be prodigious for a critic to become a poet, and it is impossible for a poet not to contain a critic.' He himself was equally infallible as a creative poet and creative critic. Did he not say (and with what truth): 'Am I not as infallible as the Pope?' He, and he alone, discovered Poe, Wagner, Delacroix, Guys, Léon Cladel, Whistler and Manet. He did everything supremely well: he aimed at perfection, and he achieved perfection. Swinburne

wrote: 'We shall never find again so keen, so delicate, so deep an unison of sense and spirit. What verse he could make, how he loved all fair and felt all strange things, with what infallible a taste he knew at once the limit and the license of his art, all may see at a glance. He could give beauty to the form, expression to the feeling, most horrible and most obscure to the senses or souls of lesser men.' He wrote in *Under the Microscope:* 'The *Femmes Damnées* of Baudelaire itself is an infinite perverse refinement, an infinite reverse aspiration, "the end of which things is death"; and from the barren places of unsexed desire the tragic lyrist points them at last along their downward way to the land of sleepless winds and scourging storms, where the shadow of things perverted shall toss and turn for ever in a Dantesque cycle and agony of changeless change; a lyric close of bitter

tempest and deep wide music of lost souls.'

The main quality in Swinburne's criticism is its exultation. 'There is a joy in praising,' Landor's phrase, might have been written for Swinburne, and he communicates to us, as few writers do, his own sense of joy in them. 'If I contradict myself, I contradict myself,' has been said by a poet, Whitman, about whom Swinburne has said many mutually contradictory things, all true in their way. What Swinburne has done is to set the man of genius in his own place, as a maker, a poet: he has challenged the world to accept Blake, not for his doctrine, but as the writer of great poems and the artist of great designs.

In every age there have been many men of genius, who were scorned as Dante was scorned, censured as Swinburne was in 1866, for being 'an unclean fiery imp of the pit,' Byron by Southey because he thought *Don Juan* (which is an absolute

masterpiece) was 'a flagititious production, by which he will be remembered for lasting infamy.' Sir Richard Burton was reviled unjustly. Swinburne often referred to him in our conversations. It was to entertain Burton that he wrote: 'I have in hand a scheme of mixed verse and prose—a sort of *étude à la Balzac* which I flatter myself will be more offensive and objectionable to Britannia than anything I have done: *Lesbia Brandon*. You see I have now a character to keep up, and by the grace of Cotytto I will.'

Swinburne began *Lesbia Brandon* in 1859: he never quite finished it, what remains of it consists of seventy-five galleys, number twenty-five to ninety-seven, besides four unprinted chapters. The first, *A Character*, was written in 1864; *An Episode* in 1866; *Turris Eburnea* in 1886; *La Bohème Dédorée* in 1866. Sir Edmund Gosse gave a very

vivid description of Swinburne, who was living in number 13 Great James Street, who was never weary of his unfinished novel, reading to him parts of it in June, 1877. 'He read two long passages, one a ride over a moorland by night, the other the death of his heroine, Lesbia Brandon. After reading aloud all these things with amazing violence, he seemed quite exhausted.'

It is possible to decipher a few sentences from two pages of his manuscript; first, in *Turris Eburnea*. 'Above the sheet, below the boudoir,' said the sage. Her ideal was marriage, to which she clung, which revealed to astonished and admiring friends the vitality of a dubious intellect within her. She had not even the harlot talent of discernment.'

This is Leonora Harley. In *La Bohème Dédorée* we read:

Two nights later Herbert received a note

from Mr. Linley inviting him to a private supper. Feverish from the contact of Mariani and hungry for a chance of service, he felt not unwilling to win a little respite from the vexation of patience. The sage had never found him more amenable to the counsel he called reason. Miss Brandon had not lately crossed his way. Over their evening Leonora Harley guided with the due graces of her professional art. It was not her fault if she could not help asking her younger friend when he had last met a dark beauty: she had seen him once with Lesbia.'

Swinburne, who invariably over-praises Victor Hugo, over-praises his atrocious novel *L'Homme qui rit*. But I forgive him everything when he writes such Baudelairian sentences as these:

'Bakilphedro, who plays the part of devil, is a bastard begotten by Iago upon his sister, Madame de Merteuil; having something of both, but diminished and degraded; wanting, for instance, the deep

dæmonic calm of their lifelong patience. He has too much heat of discontent, too much fever and fire, to know their perfect peace of spirit, the equable element of their souls, the quiet of mind in which they live and work out their work at leisure. He does not sin at rest, there is somewhat of fume and fret in his wickedness. There is the peace of the devil, which passeth all understanding.'

Certainly, for an absolutely diabolical dissection of three equally infamous characters, this is unsurpassable. Iago is not entirely malignant, nor is he abjectly vile, nor is he utterly dishonest: he is supreme in evil, and almost as far above vice as he is beyond virtue. He has not even a fleshly desire for Desdemona: yet he is the impassioned villain who 'spins the plot.' Can one conceive, as Swinburne conjectures, 'something of Iago's attitude in hell—of his unalterable and indomit-

able posture for all eternity?' As for Madame Merteuil, she is, in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, not only a counterfoil for Valmont, but a spirit of almost inconceivable malignity; yet she is not as abnormal as Iago. She has a sublime lack of virtue, with an immense sense of her seductiveness. There is no grandeur in her evil, as there is in Valmont's. In the longest letter she writes, that Baudelaire praises, she confesses herself with so curious a shamelessness as to intrigue one. In composing this for her Laclos shows the most sinister side of his genius. He shows her sterility, her depraved imagination, her deceit and her dissimulations: rarely the humiliations she has endured. As she is resolved on the ruin of Valmont, she writes in this fashion: 'Séduite par votre réputation, il me sembloit que vous manquiez à ma gloire; je brûlois de vous combattre corps à corps.' She is not even

a criminal, not even the symbol of one of the poisonous women of the Renaissance, who smiled complacently after an assassination. Her nature is perverted by the lack of the intoxication of crime. The imagination which stands to her in the place of virtue has brought its revenge, and for her, too, there is only the release of death.

Adah Isaacs Menken was, to a certain extent, the origin of *Dolores*. In a letter to Charles Augustus Howell, 1865, Swinburne says: 'I have added yet four more jets of boiling and gushing infamy to the perennial and poisonous fountain of *Dolores*.

For the Lords in whose keeping the door is
That opens on all who draw breath
Gave the cypress to Love, my Dolores,
The myrtle to Death.

And they laughed, changing hands in the
measure,
And they mixed and made peace after strife;
Pain melted in tears, and was Pleasure,
Death tingled with blood, and was Life.

Voilà, mes amis, une vérité que ne comprendront jamais les sots idolateurs de la vertu.

P.S.—Since writing the above I had added ten verses to *Dolores*, *très-infâmes et très-bien tournés*. 'Oh! Monsieur, peut-on prendre des plaisir à de telles horreurs?'

In *Notes and Poems and Reviews*, 1886, Swinburne defends *Dolores*. 'I have striven how to express that transient state of spirit through which a man may be supposed to pass, foiled in love and weary of living but not yet in sight of rest; seeking refuge in those 'violent delights' which have 'violent ends,' in fierce and frank sensualities, which at least profess to be no more than they are. This poem, like

Faustine, is so distinctly symbolical and fanciful that it cannot be justly amenable to judgment as a study in the school of realism. The spirit sports with sorrow, and jests against itself; cries out for freedom and confesses the chain; decorates with the name of goddess, crowns anew as the mystical Cotytto, some woman, real or ideal, in whom the pride of life with its companion lusts, is incarnate. She is the darker Venus, fed with burnt offerings and blood sacrifice; the veiled image of that pleasure which men impelled by satiety and perverted by power have sought through ways as devious before and since her time; the daughter of lust and death, and holding of both her parents: Our Lady of Pain, antagonistic alike of trivial sins and virtues: no virgin, and unblessed of men; no mother of the Gods or God; no Cybele, served by sexless priests or monks, adored of virgin or

of Atys; no likeness of her in Dindymus or Loreto.' And he ends: '*Qui a bu boira:* the feet are drawn back towards the ancient ways. Only by lifelong flight, side by side with the goddess that redeems shall her slave of old escape from the goddess that consumes: if even thus one may be saved.'

I saw Swinburne for the last time in the winter of 1907. He told me that about thirty years since he had the intention of writing a five-act drama on *Cesare Borgia*. Had he done so it would have been a great drama. It would have been moral in its presentation of the most ignobly splendid vices that have swayed the world: of the pride and defiance which rise like a strangling serpent, coiling about the momentary weakness of good; of that pageant in which the pagan gods came back, when the garden-god assumed the throne of the Holy of Holies. Alexander,

Cesare, Lucrezia, the threefold divinity, might be shown as a painter has shown one of them on the wall of one of his own chapels in the Vatican: a swinish portent in papal garments, kneeling, bloated, with fingers folded over the purple of his rings. Or the family might have been shown as Rossetti, in one of the loveliest, most cruel, and most significant of his pictures, has shown it: a light, laughing masquerade of innocence, the boy and girl dancing before the cushioned idol and her two worshippers.

Swinburne, after having lighted his three small candlesticks, and having arranged them with an infinite sense of order, turned to the small cupboard behind his chair where he kept his manuscripts, took out that of the *Duke of Gandia*, and read it aloud. I never imagined that he could have conceived

this one-act drama, so subtle, so supreme, out of such sorcerous material as that which lies in the hates and lusts of the Borgias, and carried it to so consummate an end.

If the three series of *Poems and Ballads* may be reckoned as one volume, the whole work of Swinburne as a poet could be divided into two exactly equal parts, for there are as many plays as poems, eleven volumes of each. The first, and the last, are plays; but at what a distance apart in years and in method! *Rosamond* is a lyric in dialogue; *The Queen Mother* had the beginnings of a sense of tragedy as the later Elizabethans conceived of it. From that time to this there have been many experiments, first in 'reproducing for English readers the likeness of a Greek tragedy,' in *Atalanta in Calydon;* then in the magnificent attempt to make an epic of a drama, in *Bothwell;* with the

strangest of all, the writing of a play, *Locrine*, in sonnets and more elaborate forms of stanzas. Now at last, in *The Duke of Gandia*, we have a play in one act and four scenes, which, in its own way, comes nearer to drama than any of the plays which preceded it.

'Charles Lamb, as I need not remind you, wrote for antiquity,' Swinburne noted in the dedicatory epistle to his collected poems; 'nor need you be assured that when I write plays it is with a view to their being acted at the Globe, the Red Bull, or the Black Friars.' It is at one of these theatres, and no other, that we can imagine the acting of *The Duke of Gandia;* or, if on any other, then on an earlier stage still, the miracle and morality stage. The speeches could be chanted one to another, without scenery, but with all the simplicity of a story told in the old homely way, voice to voice in an action related,

not represented, on the stage. In *The Duke of Gandia* only one minute of action is shown to us visibly: it is shown to us in a scene which can literally be read in print in a single minute. A description of it comes afterwards, which is much longer than this whole scene, and every scene which goes before or comes after it is a preparation for it or a judgment upon it. The curve is that of Greek drama, in which the climax is the centre, not the conclusion. It is like the curve which music makes almost visibly before the eyes, as it rises out of a depth, scales a vast height and then sinks back wavelike. Can there not be, within such narrow limits, an effect as of solemn music? That is how Swinburne's play presents itself to us, and only considered from this point of view can it be justified as any conceivable form of drama?

For, with all the vividness of the speech

more concentrated than in any other of Swinburne's plays, there is only this choral semblance: scarcely anywhere a give-and-take of speech that is to change another's mood or influence his action. Alexander is the same when he says sweet things to Vanozza Catanei, his concubine, as when he weeps over his dead son and argues with the one living. Cæsar is the same figure of evil design and unflinching purpose when he mocks his brother with poisoned words of warning and when he states the necessity of his brother's murder. Francesco crosses the stage twice, displaying his passing brightness not less when he steps out of the 'lordlier harlot's house' on the Tiber-bank into the assassin's arms, with a song on his lips:

> Love and night are life and light;
> Sleep and wine and song
> Speed and slay the halting day
> Ere it live too long.

Vanozza is beauty passed, a rose still fragrant to the senses; Lucrezia is that golden, half-innocent creature whom we recapture in the bright lock of her hair in the Italian museum. They gaze at each other in wonderment; not even the wise Cæsar knows what his spiritual father has towards him in his heart. They would have no secrets from one another, but they have no words to reveal secrets. And so they talk, in their beautiful, helpless speech, relating things to one another, things that have no meaning now that they are past or over; but holding our attention as Herod and the daughter of Herodias would have held men's eyes and ears when they stood speaking on the morality stage in the midst of the people.

Is there still, except mentally, a place for this old, in its own way, sufficing form of representation? Why should not our theatre of the mind actualize itself? The

masque is still given, and nothing more beautiful is to be seen, especially in the open air, than the dances, pantomime, speech and singing of a few fantastical people who talk in rhyme. Here is a scene for the close atmosphere of a room or hall, in which the actors might pass obscurely under a dim light, suggesting and commenting upon the actions on which they meditate. Here is one manner of speech, sharp, laconic:

Cæsar Not for hate or love.
Death was the lot God bade him draw, if God
Be more than what we make him.
Alexander Bread and wine
Could hardly turn so bitter. Canst thou sleep?
Cæsar Dost thou not? Flesh must sleep to live. Am I
No son of thine?
Alexander I would I saw thine end,
And mine: and yet I would not.
Cæsar Sire, good-night.

Exeunt into the darkness, the voices ceasing. But there has been another manner of speech, when Cæsar praises Lucrezia to his mother in the old eloquent way:

And her whose face makes pale the sun of heaven,
Whose eyes outlaugh the splendour of the sea,
Whose hair has all moon's wonders in its weft,
Whose mouth is God's and Italy's one rose,
Lucrezia.

That is the lyric chorus, eloquent and ironical. And here is the last manner, the narrative, in the mouth of the Messenger:

Two men came down
And peered along the water-side: and two
Came after—men whose eyes raked all the night,
Searching the shore—I lay beneath my boat—
Beside it on the darkling side—and saw.
There came a horseman—Sire, his horse was white—

The moonshine made his mane like dull white
fire—
And on his crupper heavily hung a corpse,
Arms held from swaying on this side, legs on
that,
I know not which on either—but the men
Held fast that held: and hard on Tiber side
They swung the crupper towards the water—
sharp
And swift as man may steer a horse—and
caught
And slung their dead into the stream: and he
Drifted, and caught the moon across his face
That shone like life against it: and the chief
Till then sat silent as the moon at watch,
And then bade hurl stones on the drifting
dead
And sink him out of sight; and seeing this
done,
Rode thence, and they strode after.

In this brief episode in the lives of the Borgias there is concentrated a complete knowledge of all that history can tell us about them. Speaking of the Mary Stuart

trilogy, *Chastelard*, *Bothwell*, and *Mary Stuart*, Swinburne said in the dedication from which I have quoted: 'And though this has nothing or less than nothing to do with any question of poetic merit or demerit, of dramatic success or unsuccess, I will add that I took as much care and pains as though I had been writing or compiling a history of the period to do loyal justice to all the historic figures which came within the scope of my dramatic or poetic design.' Precisely the same might be said of *The Duke of Gandia* as anyone who consulted no more than Yriate could not fail to realize. This close attention to history is, after all, part of the artist's conscience, and is one of the reasons why the whole life of a great historical figure can hardly be used as the material of a dramatically constructed play. No story in history is quite perfect for the history of drama, and nothing

seems so dishonourable against the memory of people who really lived in the world, and whose lives we know of, than to invent or even transform an event which happened to come, in nature's accidental way, quite out of the line of logic. The magnificent story of Nero, for instance, would be rejected by any conscientious playwright, who would refuse to make of Otho and Poppæa the direct ministers of Nero's death. Yet without that compromise with actual fact, the destiny of the tragic stage would go wrong, leaving Nero to die by the mere accident of an unexpected revolt. The *Duke of Gandia*, which is perfect of its kind, proves once more the surety of an artistic instinct which can not only choose, but reject.

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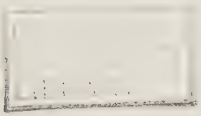

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